

FINAL

STATEMENT of
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Forest Service
United States Department of Agriculture
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Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
United States House of Representatives
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Concerning
H.R. 4622 the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act of 2002

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Gloria Manning, Associate Deputy Chief for the National Forest System, USDA Forest Service. I am here today to provide the Department's views on H.R. 4622 Gateway Communities Cooperation Act.

Enactment of H.R. 4622 would require Federal land managers to take specific actions regarding designated "gateway communities" for the purpose of improving the ability of these communities to participate in Federal land management planning conducted by the Forest Service and agencies of the Department of Interior. It would further require our response to the impacts, which the management of our lands imposes. Specifically, the requirements of H.R.4622 are to improve agency relationships

with the communities; enhance facilities and services, when compatible with management of the lands; and result in better local land use planning and decisions by Federal land managers.

The importance in recognizing and responding to the needs of communities at the gateways to National Forests is unquestionable. This principle forms the very core of Secretary Veneman's and Chief Bosworth's desires to establish cooperative relationships at local levels for all Forest Service decision-making processes. We believe that the required actions, responses, and desired outcomes indicated in H.R. 4622 are compatible with the current Forest Service approach to land management planning under existing statutes.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to briefly describe our ongoing work with local communities relevant to land management planning. The Forest Service considers gateway communities as vital partners in delivering services to forest visitors and helping us accomplish our agency mission. District Rangers are generally our first point of contact for community queries and involvement. Across the entire National Forest System we work closely with local communities, including those that would be designated under H.R.4622 as "gateway" to coordinate with them on our management actions and involve them in our decision processes to the maximum extent feasible. We are extremely committed to and interested in building and maintaining strong, mutually beneficial relationships with these communities. Many of our national forest units have actively involved local community people in training opportunities – both as providers to the agency of local expertise and insight and as learners to better understand agency planning processes and the venues through which they can help.

Under current statutes, Forest Service involvement with communities extends well beyond land management planning to very innovative projects and partnerships that support and benefit local community services and activities which contribute to multiple-use outcomes under land and resource management plans. A key benefit of this extended involvement is the building of a solid foundation of relationship and trust that is absolutely essential for successfully working together on the specific issues and processes of land management planning. The agency has staff members from national headquarters to forest-level units working on behalf of community involvement interests, including those that would be designated as “gateway communities.” The examples are many, but I will mention five here.

Examples include the Dixie NF working with 75 rural communities in four Utah counties; the Lincoln NF working with multiple communities and reservations in New Mexico; the Green Mountain National Forest’s innovative work with communities now bridging into their involvement with the Forest Plan Revision; the Huron-Manistee National Forests working with the Oscoda, Michigan school district and community on a fuel reduction project; and the Gifford Pinchot NF working with Washington state, the National Park Service, and surrounding communities in the Mount Rainer area. The latter example reflects our increasing commitment to interagency partnerships involving local community participation.

We acknowledge and agree with the findings of Congress stated in H.R. 4622 that communities adjacent to our Federal lands are affected by our management actions and public use of the lands; that the communities contribute to our mission through provision of services and products to both our employees and to those who visit our lands; that gateway communities serve as point of entry and

source of services and information for Federal land visitors; and that our coordination and communication with communities is essential to help prevent unintended consequences of agency decisions.

Mr. Chairman, I will now briefly discuss the current authorities under which we do land management planning which require and enable us to involve local governments across multiple phases of the planning process, beginning in the earliest stages of discussion. Further, the agency has authority to form partnerships with local governments and community leaders, and to provide assistance to rural communities that can serve to benefit their involvement in our planning processes. This broad scope of opportunity for community involvement is a priority in the FS. It serves as a centerpiece in our efforts to accomplish on the ground results and exceptional service to the public. Specifically, these key authorities are:

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA). Section 6 (d) of this Act requires the Secretary to provide for public participation in the development, review, and revision of land management plans and specifies required elements of that participation. The Act further states how the public is to be involved over the life of the plan. The specific requirements and procedures for complying with NFMA are contained in the agency planning regulations at 36 CFR 219. The public participation requirements apply to all types of communities, regardless of special designations such as “gateway.” Section 6, paragraphs (a) through (f) of the 1982 regulation specify and enable participation that both informs and engages individuals in process activities. Those regulations as revised in 2000 enabled broader opportunities for communities to be involved through emphasis on collaboration. Currently, the agency is working on a revision of the 2000 rule (to be published soon as a proposed rule) and it

too, will provide for a broad scope of involvement by local communities. It will also require our close coordination with other land management agencies in our mutual planning processes, a factor that will benefit the ability of communities to better understand and participate in overall Federal land management activity.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The public involvement provisions of NEPA are stated in 40 CFR 1506.6 (a) through (f). This regulation requires, in part, making diligent efforts to involve the public including local governments in preparing and implementing NEPA procedures (as is required for land management plans), and providing public notice of hearings, meetings, and documents for keeping interested people informed. Forest units exercise considerable innovation in applying these requirements to community diversity and expertise for involvement throughout the stages of planning.

The Forest Service fully complies with letter and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) direction regarding cooperating Agency status for communities and local governments. Local governments with special expertise or jurisdiction by law are invited to be a cooperator in the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) or environmental impact statements (EIS). Cooperating agencies participate in the analysis and environmental document preparation process.

The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). While this involvement under NFMA and NEPA by community members, including local officials, in discussions about pending decisions and their anticipated effects is subject to provisions of the FACA, the Act does not preclude such involvement nor does it necessarily require that involvement be formalized and structured under FACA.

The Economic Diversification Act of 1990. The Forest Service also has authority under this Act to work with dependent rural communities. This in turn has often been a vehicle for interested communities to get involved in land management planning activity. Specifically, this authority is in Section 2371, Subtitle G, Chapter 2, Section 2373, P.L. 101-624, 7 U.S.C. 5511, as amended. The program objectives are to provide accelerated assistance to rural communities located in or near a national forest and are economically dependent upon forest resources. Aid is extended to help them develop strategic plans that can diversify their economic base and improve overall community well being. In fact, under the grant opportunities afforded by this Act, FY 2001 results show that over 950 communities are operating under strategic Local Action Plans aimed at helping build local capacity, strengthen relationships, and diversify local economies. This includes work on non-timber forest products, heritage tourism, eco-tourism, value-added wood products, bio-energy, ecosystem restoration, and more. Program direction and guidance under this Act is through our State and Private Forestry (S&PF) mission area, specifically the Rural Community Assistance (RCA) program.

Section 322 of Public Law 105-277. This act, better known as the Wyden Amendment, is an authority widely used by the Forest Service, particularly in the West, to provide technical assistance to local communities. For example, the Siuslaw NF, using this amendment for land stewardship,

developed an agreement with the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Reservation. The purpose was to develop a land management plan alternative for 20,000 acres of NFS lands that are adjacent to their existing Indian reservation. Although this was a tribal application of the amendment, it has also been creatively applied to a variety of community types.

Partnership authorities. A current priority in the Forest Service, for which we now have authorities, is to form partnerships with local governments and community leaders. This capability, which we are working to expand, serves as a centerpiece in our efforts to accomplish on the ground results and exceptional service to the public. We work on mutually beneficial projects under the Challenge Cost-Share Authority, develop educational partnerships under the Co-operative Funds Act. We have the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act of 1968 that authorizes the Forest Service to provide services to states or subdivision of states.

These are the key authorities under which the USDA, Forest Service involves and assists local communities carrying out its land management planning and project coordination activities. In general, we believe these authorities support a broad range of community involvement and technical assistance to gateway communities. We do however recognize a need for improved interagency planning policy for gateway communities within similar regional geographic and customer market areas that contain multiple federal land management agencies. In particular, the western part of the country has several major common regional tourism destinations where National Parks, National Forests and other agencies all combine to serve the same customers and impact a similar group of communities. This issue is also manifested for watershed restoration, fire regime and wildlife habitat range management coordination.

Mr. Chairman, we want to continue working with you and the committee to explore possible improvements to these interagency policies for joint land management planning and assistance to affected local communities. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for providing me this opportunity to testify on H.R. 4622. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.